



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MY ELDERS

BY ST. JOHN ERVINE

I—W. B. YEATS

I KNEW W. B. Yeats long before I knew George Moore or George Russel ("A. E."). I had written a play in one act, called *The Magnanimous Lover*, which seemed to me then to be a very remarkable piece, but now seems to be a crude and violent thing made out of an undisciplined intellect; and had sent it, on the advice of Miss Horniman, to Mr. Yeats in the hope that he would think as highly of it as I did. I was living then in two rooms in a high house at Denmark Hill, a suburb of London, on the confines of a dreary slum, near to the house where Ruskin spent his boyhood . . . it is now a boarding-house . . . and I had very few friends, though I had many aspirations. I had not yet become acquainted with Bernard Shaw, though I knew him well by sight and as a public speaker, nor had I yet made friends with H. G. Wells in spite of the fact that I had spent an afternoon at his house in Sandgate in company with some other young men and women. I was too shy and inarticulate on that occasion to make any impression on Mr. Wells, for he had no recollection of me, as I afterwards discovered, when he wrote to me in kind terms about my first-published novel, *Mrs. Martin's Man*.

All young men, whatever their class or culture may be, have heroes. The world will end when young men cease to have heroes. Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells and G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc and W. B. Yeats and George Moore and "A. E." were heroes worthy of emulation to me and the likes of me. I had much respect for John Galsworthy and Granville Barker, mitigated in Mr. Galsworthy's case by the fear that at any moment he might

turn aside and shed a few unaccountable tears, and in Mr. Barker's case by the fact that he was not so very much older than I was and that he seemed to be uncertain of himself. Mr. Galsworthy's work, particularly *The Man of Property*, *The Country House* and *The Silver Box*, had the great appeal that all sincere work has, but it left me in a state of chilled speculation. It excited curiosity and aloof pity in me, but it did not warm me into wrath or affection. One sees Mr. Galsworthy's characters as the creatures of an impassive and immovable Destiny, not as the victims of human malignity or stupidity; and it is impossible to feel aroused over things which happen and cannot be helped. If a man is wronged by another and stronger man, my feelings are stirred so that I try to defend the wronged man from the assaults of the stronger man; but if he is being thwarted or crushed by some passionless Force which can neither be controlled nor persuaded nor defeated, I am not likely to do more than to murmur, "Poor fellow!" and pass on my way. Mr. Galsworthy excites your pity, but kills your hope. He seems to say, "It is useless to make any effort. Things happen and they cannot be helped!" Though he is easily made indignant over suffering, I cannot conceive of Mr. Galsworthy sounding any call to fight: I can only think of him persuading to surrender. He did not challenge: he deprecated. He was a Tolstoyan not of his Free Will, but because he had no Free Will: he turned the other cheek because he could not help himself.

It was not thus with Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells and G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. These challenging, fighting, protesting men were concerned less with pity for the victims of society than with anger against and opposition to the oppressors of society. They did not wring their hands: they put up their fists. The twentieth century youth and young woman listened respectfully to Mr. Galsworthy and were moved by his sympathy and his sincerity; but they went out to fight with Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells and G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc.

These four men did not move us in equal measure. Mr. Wells stimulated us with the quick succession of his ideas, but he disconcerted us, too, by the rapidity with which he would shed an idea for another idea. Mr. Chesterton wrote of him once that you could "lie awake at night and

hear him grow," and undoubtedly Mr. Wells has conducted his mental development in public with great frankness; we admired the courage with which he owned up when he had tried an idea and found it wanting, but we were not certain that Mr. Chesterton's statement ought not to have read, "You lie awake at night and hear him change his mind!" While we were willing to challenge everything and make it justify its existence, we were desirous, too, of finding some sure ground for our feet; and it was unpleasant and disturbing to find *A Modern Utopia* repudiated in *First and Last Things*. Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc stimulated us, too, but in a different way. Mr. Wells sent us out into the world in search of new and more adequate formulæ: Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc checked us in headlong flights with words of warning and remonstrance. They reminded us that man is of the earth, earthy; that man does not live by Good Will alone; that society is composed of a great variety of beings, generous and mean, exalted and debased, hearty and miserable, noble and petty, self-sacrificing and self-seeking, kind and cruel; and that unless we took care to remember this vital fact we should lose our way in the deserts ahead of us. They reminded us that Mr. Wells's "Good Will" was merely Godwin's "universal benevolence" all over again, and that Godwin's doctrine had made the way easy for the Utilitarians and the growth of a devitalizing system of political theory that expressed itself in the industrial régime of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Where Mr. Wells sought to convict man of a sense of stupidity, they sought to convict him of a sense of sin. Mr. Wells declared that the world needed "Love and Fine Thinking"; Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc declared that the world needed the love of God and faith in the Catholic Church. It was their persistent regard for the Catholic Church which scared us. Mr. Belloc once said that he would support the Church in an act of repression if the Church came into collision with an antagonist; and his belief was made active by his denunciation of Ferrer when that anti-clerical was executed in Spain. My Orange blood boiled when I heard Mr. Belloc palliating the offences of his church; and Mr. Chesterton and he, though their criticism interested and on occasions checked us, never established a dominion over us, because of their Catholicism.

We were not greatly interested in their beer-swilling habits: we regarded them as queer nastinesses in otherwise reputable persons. Their efforts to make a tenet of religion out of beer-swilling seemed to us to be as ridiculous as would be an effort by a Chinaman to make a tenet of religion out of opium-smoking.

Bernard Shaw was incontestably the supreme figure among these men of mind who stimulated and influenced the young men and women of the twentieth century. I doubt whether any man has ever captured or held the fancy of young men as Bernard Shaw captured and held the fancy of us. Dr. Johnson had an influence as powerful in his time as Mr. Shaw had in his; but Dr. Johnson's influence was mainly exercised over men of older years than we were, of more established habits than ours; and I doubt very much whether he affected their thoughts and outlook on life so profoundly as Bernard Shaw affected us. He could not persuade the faithful Boswell to accept his view of the American colonists, and his pamphlet, "Taxation No Tyranny," displeased his friends as much as it appeared to gratify George III and his supporters. Dr. Johnson was a critic and a scholar with very little creative ability; he was too conservative a man to be a man of genius; and he looked back too often for the liking of young men who are always looking forward. His love of tradition and settled order, while it was pleasing to men of an age when comfort and security and familiar things begin to attract the mind more than effort and adventure and change, made him unattractive to the stirring minds of young men. Shelley derived from Godwin, not from Johnson.

There is a passage in Boswell's "Life of Dr. Johnson" in which Dr. Johnson's peculiar views on the respect due to men of rank are set out very clearly. ". . . a discussion took place, whether . . . Lord Cardross did right to refuse to go Secretary of the Embassy to Spain, when Sir James Gray, a man of inferior rank, went Ambassador. Dr. Johnson said, that perhaps in point of interest he did wrong; but in point of dignity he did well. . . . Sir, had he gone Secretary while his inferior was Ambassador, he would have been a traitor to his rank and family." The question, to Dr. Johnson's mind, was not one of merit: Lord Cardross was entitled to "go Ambassador," not because he was a more skilful diplomatist than Sir James

Gray, but because he was a lord while Sir James was only a knight! This extraordinary doctrine, which may be held accountable for much in British history, might appeal to elderly men who love rules and regulations, and like to have everything neatly set out in books, but it certainly does not appeal to young men who believe in conflicts won by superior qualities; for young men, as Dr. Johnson himself said on one occasion, "have more virtue than old men; they have more generous sentiments in every respect."

Bernard Shaw is incapable of uttering such a remark as Dr. Johnson uttered in support of Lord Cardross's inept behavior. He has, indeed, said and written many foolish things and he is capable of making what are called "debating" points and cheap scores and of saying things for the sake of saying them or of annoying the complacent and the smug; but he is incapable of saying anything which supports a belief that one man shall have precedence over another, not because of his merit, but because of his birth. Dr. Johnson's statement was not a casual, fantastic, perverse statement: it was a natural result of his general theory of society. It is recorded of him that he declined to leave a room until a Bishop had done so on the ground that the Bishop's office gave him a title to precedence over a man of greater mentality! It was not humility that caused Dr. Johnson to behave thus, for he was an arrogant man, nor was it indifference to such matters, for he was a stickler for respect to himself even when he did not deserve respect: it was his belief in the providential arrangement of society in settled grades that caused him to behave in this way. The man was entitled to quit the room first, not because he was a good man or a great man, but because he was a bishop! There is probably some convenience in this belief, a simple method of preventing incivility, but it is a small convenience which does not greatly matter to youth.

I can imagine Bernard Shaw refusing to go out of the room before the Bishop has done so, in sheer humility or indifference, but I cannot imagine him refusing to do so because of his regard for the man's office as distinct from the man himself. And it is, I suppose, his irreverence for office, more than anything else, which draws young men to him. He is no respecter of persons or authorities: he criticizes them all, high or low. His courage, his vitality, his arrogance, his humility, his championship of persecuted

persons, his impulse to help an unpopular cause not, as stupid people imagine, because it is unpopular, but because it seems to him to be a just cause, and his absolute indifference to vested interests and the power of the majority—these qualities of his draw young men to him as a magnet draws a needle. It is significant, I think, that Dr. Johnson had a very strong dislike of Dean Swift to whom, in many respects, Bernard Shaw bears a close mental resemblance. It is very certain that had Bernard Shaw lived in the eighteenth century, to which, in spirit, he really belongs, he would have supported the Americans as fiercely as Johnson denounced them; and I do not doubt that his would have been the most scathing and powerful of the pamphlets written in reply to "Taxation No Tyranny."

I suppose that some of Shaw's attraction for young men is due to the youthfulness of his spirit. He is an oldish man in years, turned sixty, and his hair and beard have lost their red color and have become gray; but I never think of him as an old man; and I never think of W. B. Yeats as a young man, although he is ten years younger than Bernard Shaw.

II

One evening, a few weeks after I had sent *The Magnanimous Lover* to him, I received a letter from Yeats, written in a queer, illegible, thick style that was very difficult to read. Many of the words were incomplete: all of them were badly formed. The contrast between the handwriting of Bernard Shaw and W. B. Yeats is very striking: Shaw's writing is very clear and neat and beautifully formed and as delicate as a spider's web; Yeats's writing is obscure and untidy and shapeless and has the appearance of having been done by a blunt pen. H. G. Wells writes in a small, clean but not always clear hand. There is a certain oddness in the difference between the handwriting of Bernard Shaw and that of W. B. Yeats: that the handwriting of the poet should be so ungainly and coarse while the handwriting of the dramatist who seems to have very little of the poetic emotion in him, is shapely and fine.

The letter was to say that Yeats liked my play, but that he could not make a definite decision about it until he had consulted Lady Gregory. It had that formal, distant tone which is so characteristic of Yeats's speech and writing, but it had a pleasant postscript which gave me great pride and

delight. He said that my play was the only example of "wayward realism" that he had ever read. I did not understand what he meant by this phrase, but it was a compliment from a distinguished man, and compliments from distinguished men had never fallen to me before. I must have been a great nuisance to my friends then, for I showed Yeats's note to them and I talked a great deal about my "wayward realism" until I noticed that my best friend, himself an aspiring dramatist of the romantic school . . . he had much contempt for my realism . . . smiled at me in an odd way when I did so. I then ceased to talk in that fashion, for I am very sensitive to the censure of my friends, though I have no regard for the censure of my enemies.

After another lapse of time, I heard from Yeats again. He invited me to call on him on the following Sunday evening at his rooms in Woburn Buildings, behind the Euston Road, in London; and thither, in a state of some excitement, I repaired. I had no trouble in finding the house, for Yeats, who, in some ways, is much more precise and clear-minded than people imagine or his handwriting indicates, had given me very explicit directions how to get to it, and had even drawn a rough sketch of the neighborhood so that I should not fail to find him. Woburn Buildings consists of a number of tall houses in a narrow passage off Southampton Row, and running parallel with the Euston Road. It is a dingy, dark place, with an air of furtive poverty about it, and on Sunday nights it is depressing enough to fill a man's mind with plots for drab dramas. I have heard that H. G. Wells thought of the plot of that clever, devilish story of his, "The Island of Dr. Moreau", in the Tottenham Court Road on a Bank Holiday when he was in a mood of discontent. I believe that the whole of the "drab drama" was first conceived on Yeats's doorstep!

Shops form the ground floor of these houses, little, huckstering shops that just contrive to support their proprietors, and Yeats's rooms were on the third and fourth floors of a house which had a cobbler's shop on the ground floor. The cobbler was a pleasant, bearded man, wearing spectacles, who had some share in the management of Yeats's affairs; for when one, unable to obtain admission to the poet's rooms, required information about him, the cobbler invariably supplied it. He could tell you whether Yeats had gone to Ire-

land or was merely taking the air, and when he was likely to return, and he would offer, with great courtesy, to take a message from you to be faithfully delivered to Yeats on his arrival.

The entrance to Yeats's rooms was at the side of the cobbler's shop. There was a bell-handle over a small brass-plate, marked YEATS, and when this had been pulled a sufficient number of times, the door was opened, if he were at home, by Yeats.

He has poor and failing sight, and in the dusk of the Sunday evening on which I called on him, he could barely discern me. He stood in the hall, holding the door, looking very tall and dark, and said in that peculiar, tired and plaintive voice of his, "Who is it?" and I answered "St John Ervine". There was always something conspiratorial about the manner in which Yeats admitted a person to his rooms. You felt that you wanted to give the countersign.

"Oh, yes!" he said, without any interest, and then he bade me enter.

In one of his books, Yeats writes that life seems to him to be a preparation for something that never happens; and the quality of his voice suggests that thwarted desire which is expressed in so much of his work. He is, in poetry, what Mr. Galsworthy is, in fiction: he surrenders to life. I do not know of anyone who can speak verse so beautifully and yet so depressingly as Yeats can. The very great beauty that is in all his work does not stir you: it saddens you. There is no sunrise in his writing: there is only sunset. In his lyrics, there is the cadence of fatigue and of the lethargy that comes partly from disappointment, partly from loneliness, partly from doubt, and partly from inertia. "Innisfree", the beauty of which has not been diminished by familiarity, does not sound glad: it sounds tired. The poet's wish to return to the lake island is not due to any pleasurable emotion, but to weariness and exhaustion: he dreams of the island, not as a place in which to work and to achieve, but in which to retire from work and achievement that has not brought with it the gratification for which he hoped; and the final impression left on the mind of the reader is that the poet is too tired and disappointed to do more than wish that he might go to Innisfree. One reads the beautiful poem in the sure and certain belief that Yeats will not "arise and go now, and go to Innisfree", but that he will remain where

he is. There is no impulse or movement in the poem: there is only a passive wish and a plaintive resignation.

And all that inertia and negation and inactive desire is sounded in Yeats's voice. It is very palpable in his manner.

He warned me not to make a noise as I ascended the uncarpeted stairs: the people on the second floor might be disturbed. They were working-people, I understood, and either there was a fretful baby asleep or the people retired early because they had to rise early, and he did not wish to break their rest. Yeats can be very harsh and inconsiderate with his associates, but his bearing to poor men and women, in my experience, is very courteous and very considerate. He could not have been more gracious to a duchess . . . he probably was sometimes less gracious to a duchess . . . than he was to the middle-aged woman who cooked his meals and kept his rooms clean. I have seen distinguished men being gracious to poor, unlettered men, but most of them had an air of . . . not exactly condescension in doing so, but of altering their attitude slightly, of relaxing and unbending, of modifying their style, as it were, and making it simpler. I did not observe any effort at condescension in Yeats's manner towards that plain and simple woman. He spoke to her in the same way that he would speak to "A. E." or to Lady Gregory. I suppose that Queen Victoria was the only woman in the world to whom Yeats ever spoke in a condescending manner.

He is a tall man, with dark hanging hair that is now turning grey, and he has a queer way of focussing when he looks at you. I do not know what is the defect of sight from which he suffers, but it makes his way of regarding you somewhat disturbing. He has a poetic appearance, entirely physical, and owing nothing to any eccentricity of dress; for, apart from his neck-tie, there is nothing odd about his clothes. I remember being told that Yeats, on one occasion, being asked by his host why he wore that big, black bow, replied, with some asperity, "To match my boots!" This reply effectively quashed his host's effort to make bright conversation. It is not easy to talk to Yeats in a familiar fashion, and I imagine that he has difficulty in talking easily on common topics. I soon discovered that he is not comfortable with individuals: he needs an audience to which he can discourse in a pontifical manner. If he is compelled to remain in the company of one person for any

length of time, he begins to pretend that the individual is a crowd listening to him. His talk is seldom about commonplace things: it is either in a high and brilliant style or else it is full of reminiscences of dead friends. I do not believe that anyone in this world has ever spoken familiarly to Yeats or that anyone has ever slapped him on the back and said "Helloa, old chap!" His relatives and near friends call him "Willie" but it has always seemed to me that they do so with an effort, that they feel that they ought to call him "Mr. Yeats"! I doubt very much whether he takes any intimate interest in any human being. It may be, of course, that he took less interest in me than he took in anyone else for I am not a very interesting person; but I always felt that when I left his presence, it was immaterial to him whether he ever saw me again or not. I felt that, on my hundredth meeting with him, I should be no nearer intimacy with him than I was on my first meeting. My vanity has since been soothed by the knowledge that he has given a similar impression regarding themselves to other people who know him better than I do. I have seen him come suddenly into the presence of a man whom he had known for many years, and greet him awkwardly as if he did not know what to say. He never offers his hand to a friend: he will often stand looking at one without speaking, and then bow and pass on, with perhaps a fumbled "Good evening!" but never with a "How are you?" or "I'm glad to see you!"

It is, I suppose, the result of some natural clumsiness of manner. He has trained himself to an elegance of demeanour, an elaborate courteousness, which is very pleasing to a stranger, but he has spent so much time in achieving this elegance that he has forgotten or never learned how to greet a friend.

He was expecting other people to come to his rooms that Sunday evening . . . I remember he mentioned that Madame Maud Gonne MacBride was expected to arrive in London from Paris on her way to Ireland, and might call on her way to Euston Station . . . but no one else came. He talked to me about my play and told me that he liked it very much, but that Lady Gregory did not greatly care for it. "She is a realist herself," he said, "and all realists hate each other. Synge would have disliked your play, and Robinson does not like it, but I do!" Lennox Robinson, himself a dramatist, was then manager of the Abbey

Theatre. He asked me if I had written any other plays, and I told him that I was half-way through a four-act play, called *Mixed Marriage*, and I described the theme of it to him. He urged me to complete this play and bring the MS. to his rooms and read it to him. "The difficulty about *The Magnanimous Lover*," he said, "is that it may provoke some disturbance among the audience, and as our patent expires shortly we do not wish to give the authorities any ground for refusing to renew it. They were very angry over our production of Bernard Shaw's *Blanco Posnet* after the Censor refused to license it in England. We'll leave the production of *The Magnanimous Lover* until the patent has been renewed. If your new play were ready, we could do it first and create a public for you! . . ."

Yeats is one of the best advertising agents in the world, and I did not doubt his ability to "create a public" for me, although I thought that Lady Gregory would probably be more skillful even than he could be. When one remembers that she has established a considerable reputation as a dramatist on two continents entirely on the strength of half-a-dozen one-act plays, it is impossible to doubt that she is at least as skillful as Yeats in drawing attention to herself. A great amount of their advertising energy has, of course, been expended on the Abbey Theatre and the Irish Literary Renaissance, and a great many Irish writers, myself included, have derived advantage, personal and pecuniary, from their activities. It would have been better for us, perhaps, if Mr. Yeats's very great critical ability had been more freely employed on our work than his eulogy. There is an immense amount of creative power in Ireland, but it is raw, untutored, timid stuff, and because the critical faculty in Ireland is almost negligible, this creative power is wasted in violent, explosive plays and books or violent, explosive beliefs.

I have always believed in the interdependence of all men and minds. It seems to me that an ill-conceived, foolish political scheme must in some manner react on every other department of man's life, and that the laborer who is doing his job badly in a remote village is in some measure adversely affecting the welfare of his countrymen miles away. Violent, crude plays are inevitable in a land of violent, crude beliefs; and it is, I think, not without significance that some of the most violent, crude plays in the Abbey repertory were written by dramatists who professed

the violent, crude beliefs of Sinn Fein. When one thinks of the generosity and courage and nobility of many of the Sinn Feiners, it is hard not to lose faith in human perfectibility when one considers how foolish are the political schemes they devise. If men so good and exalted as these men are can produce schemes so stupid and sometimes so cruel, how can we hope for any progress in the world when we remember how many bad men there are?

But there is an explanation of all this crudity and violence in Ireland. For all sorts of reasons, political, social and historical and also religious, the critical faculty has rarely been employed and certainly has not been developed. Either you are for a thing or you are against it. Doubt is treated as if it were antagonism. Reluctance to commit oneself to any scheme, however fantastic or ill-considered it may be, is treated as treason to the national spirit. Anyone who asserts his belief in the establishment of an Irish Republic, by force, if necessary, is an Irishman, even though he be a "dago", and anyone who is doubtful of the feasibility of this proposal is denounced as a West Briton, an anglicised Irishman, even, on occasions, as "not Irish at all", although his forbears have lived in Ireland for generations. The state of affairs in Ireland is not unlike the state of affairs in Russia, where literary criticism, as a Russian writer has stated, has always tended to be the handmaid of political faction. "Any writer of sufficient talent," says a reviewer in the *Times* Literary Supplement, "who adopted a liberal attitude was certain of the appreciation of the *intelligentsia's* acknowledged critical leaders, and hence of a wide and enthusiastic audience. But writers whose instinct for the truth led them to doubt the sufficiency of doctrinaire discontent with the established order were debarred from the aids to literary advancement, and had to struggle against the grain of popular, and even academic, valuation".

It is even worse than that in Ireland, for there, generally speaking, there is hardly any criticism at all, although there is plenty of abuse. In great measure, this lack of criticism is due to the fact that all the mind of Ireland has been obsessed by the demand for or the opposition to self-government. There has not been any reality in Irish electoral contests for a great many years. Until the growth of Sinn Fein, there seldom were any contests at all. Candidates for parliament were frequently returned unopposed. A con-

test, if there were one, was between one Nationalist and another, concerned with matters of detail and not with matters of principle, or, at the most, between a Nationalist and a Unionist, concerned with the advocacy of, or opposition to, Home Rule. Sinn Fein has, indeed, brought a contest to every constituency, but even here the contest is concerned with the old obsession, self-government in one form or self-government in another: Home Rule within the British Confederation or a Republic outside it. If one considers that this obsession was nearly always expressed in bitter language, it is not difficult to understand how deplorable its effects have been on the general life of the Irish people. It has temporarily incapacitated them from judging any proposition or thing in a sane and dispassionate fashion; and so the critical faculty in Ireland has languished until at times one fears that it has decayed.

Yeats is a great creative artist: he is also a great critic. Had he chosen to do so, he could have had an enormous influence on the minds of his countrymen. His pride in his craft, his desire for perfect work, his contempt for subterfuges and makeshifts and ill-considered schemes, his knowledge and his skill, all these would have affected the faith and achievements of his countrymen, imperceptibly, perhaps, but very surely. It is unfortunate that he was not appointed to the Chair of Literature in Trinity College, Dublin. I know that he wished to receive this appointment and was disappointed that he did not receive it. The mind that might have disciplined and developed the imagination of young Irishmen was rejected by Trinity College, and it has turned to tiresome preoccupation with disembodied beings, to table-turning and ouija-boards and the childish investigation of what is called spiritual phenomena, but is, in fact, mere conjurer's stuff.

(To be continued)